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Country note**

Venezuela

Summary

The Executive Director presents the country note for Venezuela for a programme of cooperation for the period 2002 to 2007.

The situation of children and women

1. Venezuela has a population of approximately 24 million, 42 per cent of whom are children and adolescents, mostly living in urban centres. Despite a per capita income of $2,725 (1999), inequalities are sharp, with the fourth and fifth lowest income brackets representing more than 80 per cent of the population. National averages of social indicators hide great disparities, with exclusion having a particular impact on rural and indigenous populations — the latter representing approximately 1.5 per cent of the total population in 1997. Responsibility for children falls primarily on the mother, even when both parents are present, and an increasing number of households are headed by women. The tragic consequences of the 1999 floods brought to light structural problems, unsafe housing and precarious economic status of the population living in the affected region, which increases their vulnerability to natural disasters.

2. Real family income deteriorated during the 1990s, and in 1997, 22 per cent of households were unable to meet their basic needs. Programmes were designed to mitigate the impact of the crisis, but did not manage to address the underlying

* E/ICEF/2001/2.

** An addendum to the present report containing the final country programme recommendation will be submitted to the Executive Board for approval at its second regular session of 2001.

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causes, mainly stemming from the economy's dependence on petrol, the lack of economic opportunities for large sectors of the population (unemployment, although slightly diminishing in 2000, remains at 15.9 per cent), and an allocation of national resources that did not create a solid and sustainable social infrastructure able to reach all population groups. Spending in the social sectors, which was just above 24 per cent of total public spending in 1998 and 1999, may increase significantly as a result of current reforms being carried out by the Government.

3. The Government has begun an overhaul of the institutional setting, adopting a new Constitution, which introduced significant changes to the structure of the State and which gives formal rank to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. An ambitious plan of comprehensive social and economic reforms has been set in motion to reverse the negative trends of the last decade. It seeks to overcome poverty and places strong emphasis on children. Venezuela took a very important step with the entry into force in 2000 of the new law for children and adolescents (LOPNA), bringing the legislation into accord with the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and establishing institutional foundations, policies, programmes and protection measures to put child rights into practice. The challenge now is to make this institutional and programme setting fully effective, a process which is beginning at the national and subnational levels.

4. Most births take place in hospitals, but coverage of prenatal care by public institutions is low (25.5 per cent in 1997), thus impeding the identification of high-risk pregnancies. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) of 60 per 100,000 live births reflects a slight increase since 1990, with wide inter-state disparities. Malnutrition and lack of breastfeeding contribute to an infant mortality rate (IMR) of 20.4 per 1,000 live births in 1998, which had slightly improved during the decade. The coverage of formal and non-formal programmes for very young children is limited. There is insufficient awareness among families of the importance of stimulation to young children's cognitive and psychosocial development, and there is widespread lack of education for parenting roles and awareness of child rights.

5. Because net primary school coverage is 76 per cent, the Government has made primary education a priority, attempting to improve coverage and quality through the rapidly expanding Bolivarian School Programme, which promotes extended school hours, the provision of meals, and extra-curricular activities. Intercultural, bilingual education for indigenous children continues to have limited coverage and problems of quality.

6. There is a lack of integrated services for adolescents, limited opportunities for their participation, and a low level of education in reproductive health. Although no comprehensive data are available, it is clear that the incidence of HIV/AIDS is growing, particularly among young women. There is low awareness of the serious threat posed by the pandemic, especially among young people, despite the prevalence of high-risk behaviour. Use of harmful substances is a concern, especially in urban areas. Despite lack of adequate information on critical special protection issues, all existing evidence points to a worrisome situation associated with sexual exploitation, child trafficking and abuse, resulting from deteriorated social and economic conditions, violence and family disintegration. Official figures indicate that Venezuela has the world's sixth highest rate of violence. There is concern over treatment of adolescents in conflict with the law, and over conditions in internment centres. LOPNA created a new juvenile justice system consistent with

the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which in now gradually beginning to be implemented.

7. The Government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and presented its first report to the Committee in 1997. Recommendations received from the Committee are being put into effect, and include the entry into force and full implementation of LOPNA, the inclusion of child rights in the new Constitution, improvement in the collection of data on the situation of children, the reporting of cases of abuse by public institutions, and addressing the problem of child registration.

Lessons learned from past cooperation

8. UNICEF used its credibility and experience as a neutral, international organization promoting child rights to act as a link between civil society and government institutions in order to influence legislative changes (LOPNA) and to include child rights in the new Constitution. This involved intensive advocacy, social mobilization, alliance building and technical advice for key players.

9. UNICEF local development activities had a reduced impact in mobilizing resources to take to scale pilot projects, due to the limited involvement of crucial decision makers such as mayors and governors. Future interventions should focus on geographical areas with the highest potential impact on excluded children, and advocacy should be carried out with the highest-level decision makers, as well as with the private sector, which should leverage greater public and private resources for children.

10. The production and dissemination of information on child rights and on the situation of children in the country, in alliance with government and civil society counterparts, was crucial for child rights to become a priority on the public agenda and for UNICEF to increase the impact of its limited resources. Further work with the media will be important to reach a wider audience and improve the quality of information provided to the public.

11. Despite government efforts to develop a nationwide information system on children, taking to scale a local system supported by UNICEF, there is still a large gap between the high demand for information by decision makers, the general public and the media, and the actual generation and availability of information, which the country programme can address through support to capacity-building.

12. As the 1999 floods demonstrated, preparedness for potential emergencies should be taken into account when designing the new country programme, including strategies to promote a transition from emergency response to rehabilitation. The programme should also prepare for the possibility of a complex emergency in the region bordering Colombia, where significant numbers of displaced persons could cross into Venezuela.

Proposed country programme strategy

13. The strategic role of UNICEF is reflected in four areas. The first is to mobilize society around a widely recognized vision of child rights. The core axis already

exists within LOPNA, and established alliances will form the basis of the programme's partnership network, stimulating a country-wide movement for the fulfilment of child rights. The second is to ensure integration and dialogue among key actors involved in the design and implementation of programmes for children, so that initiatives at national and subnational levels are known and monitored by the authorities who must ultimately take them to scale. The third is to assess the potential sustainability of interventions supporting relevant local pilot projects, but only if going to scale using national resources can be reliably forecast. The fourth is to assist the State to prepare for programme continuity and rapid recovery in the event of disaster or emergency, and to ensure that the programme can, if needed, adapt rapidly.

14. The goal of the 2002-2007 country programme is to help vulnerable children enjoy the complete fulfilment of their rights. The programme will operate within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and within the social development plan of the Government. Other United Nations agency programmes, within the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, will address additional aspects of vulnerability reduction for children and their families and of support to national goals.

15. The objectives of the country programme are threefold: (a) to support increased demand by families and communities for knowledge, resources and opportunities to fulfil all rights; (b) to help implement, in national and subnational policies, programmes and budgetary allocations, the commitment to child rights expressed in LOPNA; and (c) to strengthen capacity of public institutions, civil society organizations, communities and families to take effective action to realize and sustain child rights. The programme will succeed when children experience measurable improvements at each stage of their life cycle, and when these gains can be sustained. The programme will use, as especially important indicators, progress in the situation of the most excluded children, and the elimination of the most extreme forms of violations of child rights.

16. The proposed country programme will consist of two areas of focus: implementation of child rights, and knowledge generation and information dissemination. Complementary support will come from Venezuelan components of the subregional ProAndes and Amazon programmes, separately approved by the Executive Board.

17. The *implementation of child rights programme* has as a key objective full implementation of legislation approved under LOPNA, throughout the nation. Activities will cover all stages of the life cycle, concentrating on: legal and institutional frameworks; and policies and programmes for young children, particularly early childhood, primary-school-age children and adolescents. Programme goals will include completion of unfinished goals of the World Summit for Children, such as attaining universal primary school enrolment, and emerging themes, such as enhancing adolescent life skills and prevention of HIV/AIDS. While all children and adolescents are targeted, special attention *will* be paid to those suffering the most extreme forms of rights violations and to the most excluded. Strategies will include advocacy to promote legislation, policies complementing LOPNA and technical support for its implementation; capacity-building of government and civil society institutions at central and subnational levels; and

mobilization of children, adolescents and families — with special attention to the role of fathers — as active partners in programme activities.

18. The *knowledge generation and information dissemination programme* focuses on the collection, analysis, dissemination and utilization of information on issues related to the social sector, for decision makers and families. In knowledge generation, objectives include investigating disparities, exclusion and vulnerability through data disaggregation and special studies; extending the geographic scale of the child monitoring information system, which was successfully developed in the present country programme; and capturing the voice of children through periodic opinion surveys. Key strategies include technical support for capacity-building of national partners and exchange of experiences for the identification of successful initiatives from other countries. Dissemination of information includes increased mass media programming on rights issues, on LOPNA and on the voices of children; the inclusion of the issue of child rights within universities, research centres, trade unions and other relevant partners; and increased access of adolescents to pertinent, age-appropriate and gender-sensitive information. Key strategies include technical support for capacity-building and social communication to increase demand.

19. Cross-sectoral costs correspond to those earmarked to activities in support of the country programme as a whole, such as staff and travel costs and other operating expenses.

Estimated programme budget

Estimated programme cooperation, 2002-2007[a]

(In thousands of United States dollars)

	Regular resources	*Other resources*	*Total*
Implementation of child rights	1 200	3 660	4 860
Knowledge generation and information dissemination	735	965	1 700
Cross-sectoral costs	1 000	655	1 655
Total	**2 935**	**5 280**	**8 215**

[a] These are indicative figures only which are subject to change once aggregate financial data are finalized.